

The Company Command Team

LIEUTENANT COLONEL COLE C. KINGSEED

As a new company commander, like many others before you, you will soon discover that the unit first sergeant is indispensable to you in your efforts to build a combat ready force. Not only will he be the primary conduit through which you will spell out your policies, he will also be the one who enforces standards of discipline and conduct throughout the command.

With the ceremonial assumption of command, symbolized by the acceptance of the guidon, the first sergeant transfers his loyalty from your predecessor to you. You are now his commander, and one of his primary responsibilities as a professional soldier will be to see that you have a successful command.

But you can also expect him to have a vested interest in preserving the status quo—until you direct otherwise. After all, since he helped build the company into the unit the former commander wanted, you can logically assume that he was not totally opposed to that commander's policies. It is therefore essential that the two of you establish a clear channel of communication at the earliest opportunity.

First, to set the tone of the new command relationship in your company, you will probably find it a good idea to talk to the first sergeant immediately after assuming command. This talk must cover at least two general topics—your command philosophy and your concept of the first sergeant's role. Until the two of you have an understanding on both, you will wander aimlessly and accomplish little.

A command philosophy is just as important at company level as it is at bat-

talion. Unfortunately, though, while the Army does a good job of teaching battalion command designees the importance of developing a command philosophy, it offers no such training for company command designees.

You will make the first sergeant's job a lot easier if you take the time to outline your vision of where you want the company to be six months, a year, and



18 months from now. Normally, he will want to support you, and if he understands what you want, he will be able to deliver from the beginning.

Do not let this conversation be one-sided. Two-way communication always leads to better results. In most cases, the first sergeant is a veteran of nearly 15 years of service and knows the company fairly well. He can describe the command's current strengths and weaknesses. You might ask him, for example, what five things he would do differently to improve the company's readiness, and what he knows about the company that

he feels you should know immediately. Once you have this information, you will have established a common foundation on which both of you as a team can lead the company toward the fulfillment of your vision.

Equally important, the first sergeant must understand what you expect his role to be. As a professional soldier, he will make any adjustments you want, but you have an obligation to tell him precisely how you want him to conduct business. Don't wait until he has to ask.

When I became a battalion commander, for example, I spoke to the first sergeants immediately after meeting the command sergeant major, gave them my written guidance, and outlined my expectations. A company commander can do this just as easily at his level, and this written guidance then becomes an integral part of his future performance counseling of the first sergeant. It should outline both general and specific duties, responsibilities, and authority.

The first sergeant's general duties are easy. As the senior noncommissioned officer, he sets a leadership example and serves as an inspiration to the company, including the officers, NCOs, and soldiers. He also sets the example and enforces standards of conduct, military courtesy, and uniform policies. He participates in physical training and ensures that every aspect of it is either performed correctly or corrected on the spot. Even though the first sergeant probably already knows what these duties are, he will still appreciate hearing them from you.

A first sergeant's specific duties vary with his commander. In my initial dis-

cussion with the battalion's first sergeants, I outlined several areas that I wanted emphasized. Each of these areas had several sub-categories that I also outlined in writing. These same areas may be useful to you.

Reception and Integration. The first sergeant can establish a program for accepting new soldiers into the command with the intent of making every incoming soldier and his family feel that they play an important role in the company from the start. The assignment of sponsors, the resolution of immediate problems, and assistance in finding places to live (if applicable) all fall within this category.

Company Training. In planning and conducting company training, the first sergeant will be your principal advisor on any training deficiencies and will organize remedial training. He should be the most knowledgeable NCO in the company on tactical operations and the expert in incorporating individual tasks to support the collective training outlined in the company mission essential task list.

Hold him responsible for supervising skill qualification tests (SQTs) and common task tests (CTTs), and make him the primary instructor for NCO professional development (NCOPD). Leader development must be a command priority. Have him develop a program, not just a series of classes. Tie NCOPD to upcoming company missions, and use him extensively in developing the unit training plan. A strong command team can make training interesting as well as challenging.

Accountability and Responsibility. This area of emphasis may be a bit more controversial and may vary, depending on your perspective. As the commander, you are ultimately responsible for property accountability, but you may want to hold the first sergeant personally responsible for the operation of the company supply room. Since the efficient operation of the supply room is directly linked to soldier morale, it is reasonable for the first sergeant to be involved in it. At least, direct him to conduct periodic inspections of the supply room and CTA 50 equipment. In addition, he should set the example for the soldiers by maintain-

ing property accountability in the orderly room.

Counseling. Since counseling is the key to junior leadership development, the first sergeant must train the platoon sergeants to use proper counseling techniques. He should inspect the unit counseling files periodically to ensure that the written forms are legible, that they are signed by the counselor and the soldier, and that they are being prepared on time. He should also make sure the counseling is based on good hard facts instead of being too general to be of any use.

Company Administration. The first sergeant's duties in this area include accurate status reporting, advising you on assigning new NCOs and soldiers, monitoring enlisted evaluation reports, awards, nonjudicial punishment, and many other tasks. You might mention any specific areas you want him to concentrate on. Meticulously outlining the aspects of company administration will be as useful to you as to him.

Barracks Maintenance and Inspections. You should hold the first sergeant personally responsible for supervising barracks maintenance and conducting inspections. Does the company have a good repair and utility program? Are work orders submitted in a timely manner? What are the results? Are the soldiers inspected daily? (Just as things get done that a commander checks, so do things the first sergeant checks.) Make sure he also teaches the platoon sergeants and squad leaders how to inspect.

Company Headquarters. The first sergeant is also the principal supervisor of the company headquarters. Although some commanders delegate this responsibility to the executive officer, I believe the first sergeant is better suited to the task. I suggest you hold him responsible for the supply room, the NBC room, the communications room, and the arms room.

In the Field. In a tactical environment, he can certainly help in supply functions and mess operations, but his true value lies elsewhere: Take advantage of all the experience he has had in his years of service, and have him assist and advise you on the tactical employment of the

company. He can ensure that the weapons are cleaned daily in the field and that the equipment is serviceable. You should also hold him personally responsible for the appearance of uniforms in the field.

In the process of discussing his duties and responsibilities, you may also want to discuss what you think his relationship with the command sergeant major should be. Just as the first sergeant should train the platoon sergeants to take over his job, the battalion command sergeant major should teach the first sergeants the responsibilities of his job. Consequently, you should foster a good working relationship between your first sergeant and the command sergeant major; you should certainly not try to hinder it.

Finally, in that initial conversation, you may want to ask him what he expects from you as his commander. Although he will probably not say much at this time, if you extend him the professional courtesy of asking, he will feel free to offer friendly recommendations and suggestions as time passes. Right now, he probably just wants to make sure he understands your expectations; as a professional soldier, he will take it from there.

In summary, the first sergeant will make or break the soldiers in your command. Everything from morals to morale, from ethical conduct to tactical proficiency, is squarely on his shoulders. He wants to make you successful, because the company is not just your unit; it is also his. More important, it is the soldiers' unit, and they will probably be there long after you have relinquished command.

By clearly enunciating your command philosophy and outlining the duties you expect the first sergeant to perform, you will be well on your way to developing a strong command team and a unit that is proficient in its combat skills and can wage war successfully if the need arises.

Lieutenant Colonel Cole C. Kingseed previously commanded the 4th Battalion, 87th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, and is now assigned to the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Department of the Army. He is a 1971 ROTC graduate of the University of Dayton and holds a doctorate from Ohio State University.
